DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 111 CS 214 320

AUTHOR Thomas, Gordon P.
TITLE Blurring the Boundaries: Connecting the Autobiographical and the Historical in an Advanced Writing Course.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Civil Rights; Discourse Analysis; *Discourse Modes; Feminism; Higher Education; *Personal Narratives; United States History; Vietnam War; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; Depression (Economic 1929); Holocaust Literature; *Personal Writing; *Writing Development

ABSTRACT

An advanced writing course required of English education majors may also be taken by students in the humanities. The course helps students gain experience with longer and more complex essays, develop a more mature writing style, and learn how to make metacognitive evaluations of their own and others' writing. It also extends the contexts and purposes of traditional academic writing by showing the students how their own perspectives can contribute productively to the discourse of certain disciplines and how academic discourse can provide methods for exploring personal discourse. One assignment requires students to tell their own autobiographies along with the telling of a group's collective history as represented by the Civil Rights movement and the Holocaust. Such a method would work just as well with the Great Depression or Vietnam or the feminist movement. The historical topic should be selected to meet students' needs. Reading various autobiographies, watching films on the topic, keeping a journal, constructing rhetorical analyses of various historical documents, and writing personal essays about how large national and regional trends have affected the students' own families prepares students for the course's final assignment. This involves writing a retrospective essay that draws on the students' experiences in the course and compares their conceptions of their capabilities as writers with those of two autho s the class has studied: Art Spiegelman, Claude Lanzmann, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Mary Clearman Blew. (Appendixes include six writing assignments and excerpts from student journal papers.) (SAM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 370 111

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Gordon Thomas

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Gordon P. Thomas
Department of English
University of Idaho
Moscow, ID 83844-1102

Internet: thomas@uidaho.edu
Phone: 208-885-6384

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS214320

Blurring the Boundaries: Connecting the Autobiographical and the Historical in an Advanced Writing Course

I teach an advanced writing course is required of English education majors, but is also taken by students who simply want an advanced writing course in the humanities. The purpose of the course to provide students who are already competent writers with practice in writing essays that are longer and more complex than those they have done previously. In addition, we try to develop in the students a more mature writing style, one that takes advantage of the linguistic choices that writers in English have to vary their sentence structure, emphasize certain points, or alter their tone. Finally, we hope to inculcate the skills of metacognition, so that the students are better able to articulate when and how their writing works well. While the students are already proficient at least to some degree at writing academic discourse, some of them exhibit a tendency to write formulaically. Few of them see academic discourse even in their own discipline as a powerful mode of inquiry. While they can produce an essay that will satisfy a couse requirement, this writing is not often the same as the kind they would use to solve problems they find significant outside of college. They have learned that academic writing seldom requires one to respond personally or even emotionally, and so they are in some danger of thinking of the writing they can do well as merely "academic."

The students also have a pretty good understanding of "boundaries" of discourse. They know very well the difference between a personal letter, a personal essay, and more serious academic writing. They have been successful in school before they reach my class; they hope to repeat that success in my class; they are very concerned with what I want to see in their papers.

I have recently been trying to use the course to extend the contexts and purposes of traditional academic writing by showing the students how their own perspectives can contribute productively to the discourse of certain disciplines and how academic discourse can provide methods for exploring personal discourse. I do this by blurring the oppositions between academic and personal discourse to enable us to relate, and perhaps even to affirm or restore, our personal

position with those of others, and our intellectual understanding with the power and depth of emotional response that proceeds from and shapes both autobiographical and collective histories.

I do this by blurring the boundaries between the telling of one's personal story or autobiography and the telling of a group's collective story or history. I assign the students two subjects that are often studied in a more traditional academic fashion, the Civil Rights movement and the Holocaust, not only to teach them something of the history of these two great events (although that is part of my purpose), but to get them to understand how these broad, historical subjects can be related to their personal experience and vice versa. We then examine some aspect of regional history—I have found Mary Clearman Blew's memoir *All But the Waltz* very helpful in getting the students to fuse national (or "historical") trends with their own personal pasts. I hope that a writing course based on this principle serves not just to inculcate a particular set of skills, but also to foster attitudes toward language, toward those who are different, toward the possibilities and limitations of rhetoric—in short, to develop a critical consciousness that will allow them to deal with some of the most difficult problems of our time with some sophistication, compassion, and skill.

I chose the subjects of the Holocaust and the Civil Rights Movement because I am personally interested in the topics and also because of the nature of my institution and region of the country. The method I'm describing could be just as successful with the Great Depression or Vietnam or the feminist movement, depending on the interests and experience of the teacher and the background of the students. At the University of Idaho only one percent of the students are African-American, and even fewer are Jewish. I use these topics partially to combat a kind of provinciality that I think affects the educational environment of schools like the University of Idaho, but mainly because I believe that issues of race and the legacy of mass destruction of the Holocaust are two of the most difficult problems facing our country and the world. Many of my assignments and expectations would have to be altered given a different student population. These issues are equally important in other parts of the country, but the students' emotional involvement may be dramatically higher.

Although other historical topics could work just as well, the teacher must care personally about the topic and the topic must be selected to meet students' needs. At first my students seem

to find the topics safe because they appear so distant to their own experience, in terms of both culture as well as time. As the course advances and the students become more emotionally and intellectually involved, I try to break down the barriers between "personal" and "academic" writing at the same time that the students make a connection between two kinds of history—the personal and the collective. In the rest of my talk, I'd like to describe these assignments and provide a rationale for them.

By starting with the Holocaust, I am able to involve the students almost immediately. Many treatments of the Holocaust—films, memoirs, novels, and histories—illustrate how personal stories intertwine with historical events. Two of these sources—Art Spiegelman's graphic arts memoir, *Maus*, and Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*—are accessible and revealing. I introduce the topic of the Holocaust by having them watch portions of the PBS documentary *The Longest Hatred*, particularly the first section, "From the Cross to the Swastika," an account of the origins of antisemitism. Such a background is necessary because few of my students have much understanding of Judaism; many of them have never even met a Jewish person. In *Maus*, Spiegelman tells that story of his father's experience as a survivor of the Holocaust. At the same time, though, it is the story of Spiegelman getting the story from his father. It is also the story of how Art Spiegelman's childhood and young adulthood as the son of Vladek Spiegelman. The entire work is presented in cartoon-fashion, with Spiegelman representing the Jews as mice, the Nazis as cats, the Americans as dogs, the French as frogs, and so forth. The problems of representation that this poses do not become completely clear until the second part of the work, where in a long self-referential section, the mouse representing Art Spiegelman ponders the difficulties of producing an autobiographical, biographical, and historical work about the Holocaust in the form of a comic book.

I pay particular attention to this theme of self-referentiality so that the students consider the difficulties involved in the telling of personal stories that have historical significance. Spiegelman clearly intends his work to stand for more than an account of his father's personal story: Vladek Spiegelman's personal story involves a wide variety of experiences—everything from attempts to pass as a non-Jew, hide from the authorities, and escape to a less threatening country, to being captured by the authorities and deported to Aushwitz, where he and his wife

survive by making themselves useful in the work camps and get a close-up view of the machinery of death. But Spiegleman also makes much of the *way* that the story is told—by a lonely, embittered old man, who is some important ways did *not* completely survive the Holocaust. In fact, growing up with this man as one's father is an important subplot—perhaps even the main plot—of the story. Spiegelman is, in fact, writing both an autobiography and a biography, with the two blurring together to comprise a history of Holocaust and its aftermath.

Another work I use to blur the autobiography with history is Claude Lanzmann's 9½-hour documentary *Shoah*, which consists almost entirely of in-depth interviews with about 15 participants in the Holocaust. The film can be rented in many video stores and until recently, an inexpensive transcript of the English subtitles was available from Pantheon. Most of the people interviewed are victims, but some are bystanders, a couple are historians, and a few are perpetrators. Lanzmann has broken up the long interviews in pieces and rearranged them by various themes and subjects to create a vast work of art (he strongly objects to referring to his film as a documentary). In other words, the students are asked to look at large stretches of people talking of their own personal experiences. This oral history lacks the premeditation of the usual autobiography, but it is clear that most of the people are speaking for the first time of things that are very important to them.

I ask the students to keep a journal of their feelings and observations as they watch portions of the film. We watch one or two segments a day in class for a couple of weeks, and the students must also watch a 90- to 100-minute portion of the film on their own outside of class. Once I've set the context, students generally find many sequences emotionally wrenching; I ask them to record both their feelings and some observations about those feelings in their journal. As the viewing proceeds, many students become angered with Lanzmann for his aggressive questioning technique. As we discuss these techniques and Lanzmann's overall style, it begins to come clear that Lanzmann does not so much provide a record of what happened in the past (the more traditional aim of a documentary) as he *reenacts* the Holocaust by getting the victims and even the perpetrators to describe in detail their feelings and their actions during these times. Seen in this way, film implicates even the viewers in this reenactment. I encourage the students to see this effect and to deal with it in their journal writing.

In your handout [provided in appendix], I have provided a few excerpts of students' writing about the scene in *Shoah* where Abraham Bomba, the barber, tells of having to cut the hair of women at Treblinka just before they were gassed. He breaks down in the telling of this story, but Lanzmann does not stop filming. Instead, he insists that Bomba go on and complete the story, which he does after a pause of about four minutes.

I ask the students to rearrange, delete, and edit their entries in much the same way that Lanzmann had to do with the hundreds of feet of film he gathered from five years of interviews. The students are to attempt to create in the reader a certain effect, which they must describe in an introduction to the re-arranged entries, a little the way Lanzmann has explained his film and his technique since the film appeared. I see this assignment as crucial to getting the students to draw a link between personal stories and history itself. By this point in the course, the students are often quite interested in the Holocaust from a purely historical perspective. I try to get them to see how the film shows how it is possible to develop an historical perspective from an analysis of individual stories. Their own journal becomes a record of their reactions to an overwhelming experience; in this sense, it is similar to the film. What began, then, as a recording of the students' reactions to this terrible history actually becomes a kind of history itself.

To bring this blurring of the historical and the autobiographical closer to home, I ask the class to analyze a particularly dramatic portion of the Civil Rights Movement from a rhetorical perspective. Although there are many periods that will work, I like to concentrate on Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," not only for the rhetorical power of the text itself but also to analyze how it was composed and published in 1963 and what was at stake for the Civil Rights Movement itself and for American democracy. My conclusions of this period depend on how this period is represented in the *Eyes on the Prize* series from PBS, Taylor Branch's history of that era, *America during the King Years*, and especially Keith Miller's rhetorical analysis of King's language, *Voice of Deliverance*.

I start by asking the students to analyze the "Letter" for its rhetorical significance. Before they can do this in any depth, they must understand the status of the Civil Rights Movement in the spring of 1963, how it badly needed a victory after the long frustration resulting from nine months of demonstration in Albany, Georgia, which did not result in any laws being changed,

how the City of Birmingham was in crisis over the form of government it was to have brought on, in part, over widespread dissatisfaction even among whites over the image the city was developing as the movement continued. King wrote the letter just before "Bull" Connor unleashed his police dogs and fire hoses on the demonstrators to create one of the most famous incidents of police brutality in this whole period.

Although most students are mesmerized by these events (largely because they haven't heard of them before, except in very general terms), my main purpose in having them study the "Letter" is for them to see how effectively King weaves personal stories in with more abstract political and theological ideas and arguments. I encourage the students to use a wide variety of approaches and organizing strategies for this assignment—everything from quick historical sketches of the immediate background of the writing of the letter to personal anecdotes used to support an insight into how the *Letter* does (or does not) apply to racial problems today.

During the time that they are working on the first assignment, they are also reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, in preparation for the fourth assignment, which asks them to explore differences between King and Malcolm in their approaches to the problem of racial inequity and, most importantly, differences in how they advance their points rhetorically. Malcolm, of course, delivered many speeches, but he took almost no overt political action, his autobiography being his greatest achievement and the reason for his high status today. In comparison, King's speeches are heavily referential (although some of his most famous ones deal with him personally), while Malcolm constantly used his own life to make his major points. Exactly who the audience is for the autobiography and how that audience has changed over the years is a topic that some students might explore. Others might look into the way the text was written—it is supposedly an "autobiography," but the words are mostly Alex Hailey's. King's work appears to be just the opposite—or is it?

In the course of carrying out these two assignments, my students have to wrestle with their own attitudes toward racism in America. I try to challenge the conventional view that King's nonviolent methods are the very best way to handle all cases of racism and that Malcolm X is of interest to us mainly because of the way he went from being such a "reverse racist" as a member of the Nation of Islam to coming around to King's views in the last couple years of his

life. I try to create circumstances in the course that make it possible for students to undergo at least small change in their attitude toward racism. I especially try to get them to understand that there is a similarity between this change in attitude and the development of Malcolm's ideas throughout his life.

The students are now familiar with how collective autobiography or history blurrs into biography, and how for some authors the same material can blurr into autobiography. They are now ready to consider a personal and introspective view of both regional and family history—Mary Clearman Blew's *All But the Waltz: A Memoir of Five Generations in the Life of a Montana Family*. This collection of essays is very useful in an advanced writing course, especially for students from the West, because Blew does not write them chronologically, nor are they stories exclusively about her. Like Maus, the book is based on a combination of personal memory, a re-telling of family stories, and more traditional historical research. It is an absolutely unsentimental—even, at times, hostile—view of life on the Montana frontier and homesteading days. Ultimately, though, the students come to see that the whole book is autobiographical in a complex way. While the syntax and vocabulary of Blew's style are not difficult, the structure of these essays does not meet the students' expectations for what happens in a memoir. Similar to King's *Letter*, Malcolm's *Autobiography*, and Spiegelman's *Maus*, Blew's work blurs the boundaries between personal writing and history by showing how the lives of individuals represents and connects to larger forces in regional and even national history. To fully understand her essays requires a more thorough knowledge of the development of the West and the larger history of the U.S. than most students possess. While I'm not above teaching them a little of this history, the purpose of our study is for them to make a connection between the autobiographical and the historical.

As a final exercise in blurring the boundaries between history and autobiography, I sometimes ask the students to write an essay about their own family that combines historical detail, a novelist's technique to creating scenes from the past, and psychological analyses. This last work is the only fully "personal" essay that the students do, but they carry it out in the light of what I hope is by that time a fuller understanding of how their own lives and those of their family members has some significance in large national and regional trends.

Although I feel that my particular topics provide a powerful motivation for getting the students to blurr oppositions between academic and personal discourse, national and regional history, and history and autobiography, I want to stress again other topics should work just as well, provided the teacher was personally involved with the issues to get the students excited and interested. Once these boundaries are blurred, the students can then be asked at the end of the course to trace the boundaries once again.

Toward this end, I prefer to use as a final assignment the task of writing a retrospective essay that draws on the students' experiences in the course and compares their conception of their capabilities as writers with two of the authors or works that we have studied—Art Spiegelman, Claude Lanzmann, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Mary Clearman Blew. Of course few students bear much similarities to any of these five authors, but this last essay asks them to analyze their capabilities, not their accomplishments. I am hoping by this point that some intellectual development has occurred and that the students are able to articulate these changes using some of the analytical skills they have acquired by studying these other works.

So far I've taught this course three times, but never quite the way I've described here. The students are writing differently at the end of the course. They often appear to be unusually involved in the subject matter of the course. This may be simply because they like the variety of assignments and the content of some of the material. Perhaps, the timing of the assignments as the semester advances—the way that the writing comes closer to home—works to alleviate the fatigue they might otherwise feel as the semester continues. Borrowing a phrase from Barry Kroll's book on the teaching of the literature of the Vietnam War, I prefer to think that by engaging the students' hearts—by involving them emotionally in these past events—they are thereby encouraged to use their minds in a different way.

Writing Assignment 1

Write an essay that examines *Maus*, Parts I and II, as a work of literature. You may also incorporate material from another source if you wish to do so. This source may include written materials, but it may also include films or interviews. You may wish to read other reviews of *Maus* when it first came out (remember that these two books were first published several years apart).

Length: 5-7 pages.
Due dates:

Select an approach for considering this work:

- Character development or analysis. Select one or two characters and analyze *in ways that other readers probably have not noticed* how these characters develop and interact. Pay particular attention to how Spiegelman develops the characters.
- Thematic approach: select one theme that Spiegelman develops and examine how it is treated and expanded upon throughout the two works.
- Critical: What do you know about recent literary theory that applied in an interesting way to this work? Here you might focus on the self-reflexive nature of Spiegelman's work, on how its real subject seems to be the act of writing (broadly construed). In constructing this work, how is Spiegelman constructing himself and his family?
- Historical: how does this work shape up as a piece of history writing? What is history to begin with? What is the relationship between history, traditionally considered, and autobiography? Does this work explore this relationship in any way that you can expand upon. How well does this work serve to provide us with an understanding of a significant era in 20th-century history.
- Social: to what extent does *Maus* describe a particular social group and explore the reasons that that group remains a group? The topic of stereotyping and how it affects both those in and out of the stereotyped group can be relevant here.

You may be able to think of an approach that I have not mentioned here. Please let me know of your plans if you are about to try something really unusual.

If you do use other sources for this assignment, you will need to provide a bibliography. Use the MLA style in documenting your sources.

For short quotations in your text, identify the volume number and page number. For example: **(I 43)** To do a blocked-out quotation, photocopy the pages you wish to "quote" and reduce it slightly. Then cut out the panels that you wish to comment about and paste or tape them in your paper, in a space you leave in your text for that purpose. Be sure to lead in to that "quotation" and follow up from it in the same way that you have been doing with more conventional blocked-out quotations. Supply a reference for each of these quotations as well.

WA 2: Journal of your Experience Watching *Shoah*

For this paper, you are asked to keep a journal over a relatively short period of time and turn the result into a paper. So, what I'm really asking you to do is to write and "publish" your journal: you must make selections from the journal that will be interesting for other people. Teachers sometimes require students to keep a journal; usually the only hard part about that assignment is having the discipline to make entries in it regularly. For this paper, though, I will also be looking at the quality of your ideas and trying to assess the depth of your thought. This is a pretty subjective thing, I know, but it is something that we always look at least to some degree when we evaluate writing. So, as you write in your journal, you want to cultivate habits that will result in writing that has some depth. Here are some suggestions:

1. Try to be as specific when you are discussing the movie. Name names and try to describe particular scenes, quoting part of the script if necessary. It's easy to start an entry talking about "the guy on the tape." But you know the names of the people who are speaking; if you don't remember, use your book to remind yourself. Also, work at being as specific as you can as to what happens in the film. Describe what you remember from the shots. Try to note the background of the scenes and ask yourself why Lanzmann made the choices that he did.

2. Work at being honest with yourself and with your readers. Remember that you don't have to put *everything* you write into the version of the journal that you will show me and others in the class. If you have a really negative reaction to something that you've read, develop those feelings as much as you can. Put all that out on paper. Don't worry if you end up writing quite a lot; you can always whittle it down later.

3. At the same time, try to reserve *some* time during a composing session to developing a critical perspective on what you're watching and what you're writing. If it doesn't work for you to do this at the same time that you write emotionally, try to devote an entire composing session to writing in a more detached way; you might look back at your own writing and question what you yourself have thought and felt. For example, you might find yourself especially moved or bothered by the stories of one of the survivors. After you've written about that feeling initially, come back and re-examine it, trying to determine where your feelings come from. Go back over the same ground twice, but this time looking at it from a different perspective. You may find that upon more sober reflection, some of these stories are impressive only because you actually see the person involved. What about all those who can't tell their stories? Or what about people who have lived through other difficult periods in history? What makes the story of the people in *Shoah* different? Or is there any difference?

4. One thing to try is to play devil's advocate for yourself for at least part of an entry. Try to note weaknesses or excessive sentimentality in your thinking.

5. Try to incorporate into your reflections anything we've said in class this semester about the Holocaust, including any of the ideas or information mentioned in class by either Myron Schreck, Alan or Kyle Rose, any observations by other students, or anything I've said.

6. I emphasized this on the first day I gave the assignment, but I'll do it again: it is *very important* that you try to write regularly (at least two or three times a week). Do not try to compose a big section of your journal next week when it will be due in its first draft form. You need some time to let ideas incubate *in writing*. It is true that you can let an idea develop just by thinking about from time to time, but most writers find that *the act of writing the idea down* transforms it in some way and changes your thought processes. Peter Elbow, an important writing theorist, describes this as using the paper as a "prosthesis" for the mind--as a kind of extension of the mind. He argues quite persuasively that when you get a thought out on paper, you can break the pattern of circular thinking that can sometimes develop when you think obsessively about one thing.

Here are some issues to consider as you compose your entries:

- Lanzmann sounds at times as the most comforting and understanding interviewer that these people could hope for. But at the same time, there's an urgency or even a strong sense of direction that he develops with some of his interviewees. He undertook this project in the late 1970's because he wanted to be able to talk to these survivors before they died from causes like old age (much like Art Spiegelman approached his father). I think that he finished filming about 1980 and spent about 5 years editing the huge amount of film he had gathered. Why is it so urgent that Lanzmann record what these people have to say? Why does he push them so hard to remember details? Is he being inhumane in some of these efforts? Certain of

the survivors have terribly hard stories to tell. It is also hard for us to listen to them. Lanzmann insists, though, that these stories must be heard. Do you agree?

- When Lanzmann interviews the local Polish people, he has a specific purpose in mind--he wants to show that they were much more aware of what was going on in the camps than they have led people to believe. He also wants to expose their anti-Semitism, which these people are not sophisticated enough to hide. Note how his line of questioning proceeds when he's talking to these people. Does he ever seem to be angry with them? Is he being fair with them? Is "being fair" important under these circumstances?

- Lanzmann also interviews Germans who played important roles in the death camp operations. These people are much more sophisticated than the Polish peasants. It looks to me as if Lanzmann had represented himself as a somewhat different kind of person than he really was in order to gain their cooperation--perhaps they think they're talking to a sympathetic right-wing historian of sorts. He uses a hidden camera, but he also takes pains to show us that it was hidden by filming the van that capturing the interview. Notice that it wasn't necessary for him to do that; he need not have emphasized that he was resorting to subterfuge in order to get these interviews. Was this deception worth it? Is it unethical of Lanzmann to resort to this kind of dishonesty in order to get the attitudes and words of these ex-Nazis on tape? Notice that if he had identified who he was overtly, it is likely that these people may have reacted as Oberhauser does--the man who is tending bar and won't talk to Lanzmann.

- Filip Muller gives one of the longest interviews. He starts off fairly unemotionally, given the subject matter, but it becomes hard for him to proceed as the interview continues. Some things affect him more than others. What pattern do you detect there? What is the nature of his particular agony in living his memories again? Muller also wants to tell the story of certain heroic actions. Do these actions seem heroic to you? Abraham Bomba's interviews have a similar pattern, as you will see in class, but he seems less interested in describing heroic actions.

- There are certain instances and certain people whom Lanzmann seems to find heroic. Can you tell who they are and why?

- He returns frequently to the historian Raul Hilllberg, who is an extremely deliberate speaker. At first, he may look boring to you, but I think if you consider carefully what he's saying and how Lanzmann uses him in the film, you can see that Lanzmann feels that his kind of history—the history that actually counts things and people in a painstakingly accurate way--is also necessary if we are going to understand the entire event. Hillberg finally appears to be quite emotional to me, but in a different way--perhaps *passionate* is a better way to describe him. More than any other single person, Hillberg builds the case for showing how embedded the evil of the Final Solution was in the bureaucracy and the thinking of not only the Germans, but also other Europeans, especially the Poles.

- This idea can even be applied to the actions of the Allies (specifically the American and British bombing command), which dropped tons of bombs on German cities, killing about 500,000 civilians at the same time that they refused to bomb Aushwitz because it had no strategic value (in contrast about 50,000 British civilians died from German bombing). One thing that Lanzmann does not bring out is the fact that the Poles also suffered terribly from the German occupation; many people consider them also to be victims of the Holocaust as well. Their entire officer corps and the entire civilian intelligentsia were killed by the Germans.

This is only a partial look at the Holocaust. Lanzmann spends a good deal of time explaining the situation at Chelmo, where the gas vans were first used. He seems to see this as a microcosm for the entire Holocaust, and he concludes that section with a kind of indictment of all of German industry that actually profited from these events. Many of these companies are still in operation today. Try to trace through this and the other of his major topics: how Treblinka operated and served as a practice area for the full-scale operation of Auschwitz and Birkenau (sometimes called Auschwitz II). Toward the end of the film, he examines the question of why the Allies didn't do anything about it, when they knew from people such as Jan Karski (interviewed at some length) what exactly were the conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto. (Karski met with Churchill and Roosevelt after he was smuggled out or Poland by the Polish Underground.) He concludes with stores from the destruction of Warsaw Ghetto, perhaps the most heroic defense of the Jews for their lives. He seems to see this story as a metaphor for the Holocaust as well, how an entire people could be destroyed. But these are only my observations. If you examine the end of the film, see if you can determine a pattern for why he emphasizes the Warsaw Ghetto at the end of the film.

Excerpts from the Student "Journal" Papers (WA 2)

The interviewer then begins to ask him [Abraham Bomba] about how he felt when he saw the naked women arriving with their children and it is just devastating to watch his face as he recollects his awful experience. He had known many of them that had come into the gas chambers, yet he could not say anything to them as to what was going to happen. They were to believe that they were just there to get a nice hair cut. He was *ordered* by the Germans to defile his own people; to cut the hair that is such a personal aspect to their beings. I found myself asking questions such as, How could he live on after letting them all die without letting them know that they were going to die? Wouldn't he feel so much extreme guilt for doing this, even though it meant his own life? I suppose everyone survives in their own way and Mr. Bomba had his own way of dealing with the situation. He had made himself learn *not* to feel anything, to try and view these humans as simply "parties" that were led in to get a hair cut. Later, during the interview, he becomes very emotional and can hardly continue, but Lanzmann pushes him on. This was when Mr. Bomba broke down and I felt my own heart being ripped out. I wasn't angry with Lanzmann for prodding him and urging him to go on, even though it looked so painful for Mr. Bomba. Lanzmann did this to provoke real emotions in order to give the skeptics a chance to realize that the Holocaust was not fabricated: that these are human beings with true emotions, who survived a true hell. Watching Mr. Bomba find the courage to continue on with his recollections and come to grips with himself was a very moving experience. Lanzmann seemed to want the audience to see this courage and pain, so that we can find it within ourselves to listen and try to realistically understand what exactly happened. I won't soon forget Mr. Bomba's tears, and I think that is what Lanzmann had in mind.

The interview with Bomba in the barber [shop] is a brutally emotional scene to watch. He seems so cool and collect[ed] at the beginning but then the memory of a barber who had to cut the hair of his wife and sister is too much for him to take, and he breaks down. Lanzmann, however, pushes him to continue, and this is perhaps the hardest part of the scene to watch. I wanted to say "come on Claude; leave this poor man alone."

Emotions aside, the scene Lanzmann creates here in the barber shop is ingenious. He almost re-creates the actual experience Bomba relates. Bomba explains that the women were not to know anything about what was going on or about the fact that awaited them. The women were simply supposed to think that they were there for a hair cut. Lanzmann creates a similar atmosphere in this scene through language. The interview is conducted in English, but most of the other people in the barber shop do not speak English. Like the women in Bomba's story, the men in the barber shop have no idea what is going on around them, other than the fact it is something of extreme seriousness. Even the man whose hair Bomba cuts is unaware of what Bomba is talking about. When you think about that, the point where Bomba shows the camera exactly how they worked to cut the women's hair on this man's head becomes kind of horrifying in itself.

The setting and the fact that Bomba is working while he is speaking is interesting [in] another way as well. Lanzmann clearly wants Bomba to have the breakdown which he eventually does, and his method of taking Bomba to that point is as ingenious as the scene he created. It seems obvious that Lanzmann asked Bomba to cut hair during the interview in hopes that the act of cutting hair now will remind him of cutting hair at Treblinka. This is indeed the effect, but the cause is perhaps deeper than suspected. In an earlier interview, it is clear that Bomba needs something to focus on while he speaks. The memories are just too painful. In this interview he focuses on a point above and behind the camera. Lanzmann uses this sense of focus in the barber shops scene. Having Bomba cut hair while he talked gives him something to focus on to control to pain of the memories. So cutting hair in this scene works paradoxically, helping Bomba to control his emotions and speak and also causing him to lost control of his emotions and break down. The reason this works is because Lanzmann is able to lead him towards more painful and repressed memories. They almost come out accidentally [sic] because Bomba is also focused on giving a hair cut to a paying customer.

Like I said earlier, I feel that *Shoah* affected me just as much as *Night and Fog*. Although now when I think about when I saw *Night and Fog* for the first time during class, I remember that I started crying because the pictures were so graphic and horrible. Now comparing *Shoah* to this experience, there was one scene that

affected me just as strongly; Abraham Bomba in his barber shop. I wondered why Lanzmann chose to film Bomba cutting hair in his own shop. To add to the dramatic effect? What Bomba went through and how he describes seeing the people right before they were put to death is overwhelming to me. When he begins to explain the time when his friend saw his wife and sister, he cannot go on talking about it. He practically begs Lanzmann not to continue, to stop filming. But Lanzmann does not give in, in fact he's very persistent about continuing. Perhaps Lanzmann could have stopped filming and given him a chance to compose himself. Lanzmann's decision to film the whole situation is quite effective, only because it shows true pain and lets us feel only a slight bit of the whole horrible experience that Bomba had.

I believe it was necessary for Lanzmann to force these emotions out of the survivors. He wanted to unveil the hidden emotions and hidden facts from the Holocaust. If he would have been impassive about it, I'm sure he would not have gotten all the information he did. He had to be persuasive and forceful and sometimes use a little trickery to get some of the people to express their true emotions.

During this scene we observe Bomba at work cutting a man's hair. Watch Bomba cut this man's hair and at the same time imagining him cutting the hair of Jewish women minutes before their death had an incredible impact on me. It is quite disgusting. The contrast makes the process seem petty and covers up the true hell it really was. This hell is brought out through Bomba's final reaction. We understand that Bomba was in many ways dead during the Holocaust and he still remains numb to what he saw and did. He even says that he had to act as if he was dead and that nothing mattered or else he could not have survived. Even as Bomba begins to talk to Lanzman. he talks too calmly and is too unaffected by what he is saying. His emotions are unevident and he, like the other survivors, seems detached to what he experienced. But as he begins telling more and more, Lanzman keeps pushing and somehow revives Bomba by letting him release some of the bottled up emotions he has. As a viewer I felt most moved by this scene and I felt a human connection to Bomba. I believe this scene is incredibly important in understanding Lanzman's attempts. Lanzman wants to revive the memories of the Holocaust. He wants no one to forget to try to hide what happened. It is important for us to know and remember what happened. Lanzman finds himself in a position where he can remind the world what people are capable of and the effects the Holocaust has had on human morality as a whole.

The image of Abraham Bomba is forever seared into my mind, the place where when I am idle, he will be one of the first faces I see. The scene is set up in a barber shop where we see Mr. Bomba cutting hair. It is no wonder Lanzmann does this because the questions he asks are concerning Abraham's occupation as a prisoner of the Germans. It should be remembered that Lanzmann knows the answers to the questions he is asking, the staging is only to further the response of the individual being interviewed.

Abraham was selected by the Germans to make those about to enter the death cambers less wary of their impending death. He cut the hair of woman just before they were killed in the chambers. This served two purposes, the hair was used by the Germans, and the woman were comforted and not suspicious.

While he is talking he never looks at the camera, his comments are given as if he is talking to the individual he is giving the haircut to. He has built a wall around him and it is this wall Lanzmann is trying to take down. He questions him precisely, almost irritatingly, Bomba appears to answer bitterly at times and dodges certain questions. For example, when asked how he felt to have these naked women coming into the room to have a haircut, he replies, "I felt that accordingly I got to do what they told me, to cut their hair in a way that it looked like the barber was doing his job for a woman . . . " This can not be his first reaction, but more of a secondary response. Who can tell what the first would be? I guess it to be one of shame and then a cascade of rapidly shot emotions I assume he has packed tightly away on his side of the wall.

At the end of the interview Abraham cracks, and the scene becomes bitterly emotional. I found myself telling Lanzmann to get the damn camera out of the guy's face. I feel the pressure and the tension that carries on for minutes, wanting to put my arm around him and take him out of the room. I found myself hating Lanzmann. My wife asked why I was irritated, and I found it next to impossible to share his story second hand. It must have ripped him inside to witness a man with his wife and family hours before they were to cease existence in a heartless and pitiless manner and not be able to do anything.

Writing Assignment 3

Length: 4-6 pages of text (900-1200 words).
Due dates:

Write an essay that analyzes "Letter from Birmingham Jail" from a rhetorical perspective. Take into account as large a view as you can manage of the whole situation that King is working from—from the specific situation in Birmingham and the goals of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the Birmingham demonstrations as opposed to what the local clergymen wanted, as well as the larger situation of what happens when injustice occurs in America (or anywhere).

Things to consider:

- Provide some historical background as to what prompted the demonstrations. Use information from the "No Easy Walk" and from Taylor Branch's *Parting the Water: America in the King Years 1954-63* (on 2-hour reserve in the library).
- Look at the tone that King uses in composing the letter. Consider who he is writing to. Why is his tone suited to these people?
- Consider the audience. Think in terms of there being a primary audience (the Birmingham clergymen) and a secondary audience (the larger audience that read the letter when it was published).
- Consider King's "ethical" stance. How does he represent himself? What does he gain by writing the letter from jail, rather from some other place?
- Consider the kinds of arguments he uses: are they rational or emotional? Are they "ethical" to use Aristotle's terms (which we'll talk about in class).

Don't feel you need to cover all these points or cover them in this order. But they should give you some idea of what to do in the paper

Writing Assignment 4

Length: 6-8 pages of text (1200-1500 words)
Due dates: First version due on Friday, February 11. Final version due Fri., February 18.

Write an essay that compares the rhetoric of Martin Luther King throughout his career, but especially in "Letter from Birmingham Jail" to that of Malcolm X, as shown in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. You may wish to make of the materials available on reserve in the library, especially these works.

Malcolm X. *Malcolm X Speaks*. This is a collection of some of Malcolm's speeches.

Taylor Branch. *Parting the Waters: A History of America during the King Years*. Use this for some background information on Martin Luther King.

C. Vann Woodward. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. This short book my help to give you an idea of the general atmosphere for civil rights in the 1950's and 1960's.

You should also be able to make use of the Marshall Frady's article from *The New Yorker* (12 October 1992), pages 64-81, which will be distributed in class, to get some background knowledge on Malcolm X, including details that vary in some ways from the autobiography. You may want to begin the paper or tie it in some way to current events, especially the controversy over Louis Farrakhan's firing of a top aide (Farrakan is the current head of the Nation of Islam), which you can get from the articles I have given you from the *New York Times*.

The main purpose of your paper should be to explain the general appeal of these two authors to people, both white and black (and other nonwhite people if you chose to do so), today. Generally speaking, King has attained a kind of respectability today, especially among white people, that he did not enjoy during his lifetime. Harder to explain is the increasing popularity of Malcolm X., especially among young African-Americans. By analyzing the methods that these two men used to present themselves to the American public, you should be able to derive some insights into their overall effectiveness, the audiences they appealed to, and how that appeal has changed during the last 30 years.

Writing Assignment 5

Write an essay that examines Mary Clearman's Blew's *All But the Waltz* as a work of literature. Be sure to incorporate any relevant information you pick up from Mary Blew's visit to class.

Length: 6-8 pages.

Here are some possible approaches:

- Genre considerations. Her book is a memoir, but what does this mean, more specifically? She tells the story of her family across five generations, and she tells the story of how she came to know these stories. Is it in fact more accurate to call her work a form of autobiography? If so, why? What does it have in common with other "autobiographies" you have studied this semester—Malcolm X's or even Art Spiegelman's?
- Structure of the book. Here are a few question to get you started: Why are the essays arranged in the order that they are? What does "The Sow in the River" come first in the book. (To answer this question, you have to offer an interpretation of that essay.) What is the relationship of "Reading Abraham" to the other essays in the book? Why does "All but the Waltz" come last, and what does its title mean?
- Technique: Some parts of Blew's book read like a novel, others more like a nonfiction essay. What is the difference between these types? You might choose two essays to compare in terms of technique? What trade-offs are involved in her making the decision to pursue a certain technique?
- Themes: Certain family themes begin to develop in the second half of the book. The way they converge strongly affects one's reading of the last essay. Trace the development of these themes to show how Blew intends her readers to interpret her family history. The book can also be looked upon as something broader than the individual record of one family. Larger historical forces are at work in the West during the period 1895 to 1960 or so—the depopulation of the countryside, the changing role of women, the growing away from the land (pay attention especially to the people who leave Montana and note why), the lost romanticism of the West. How does the book illustrate how some of these forces are played out in this one family?

Writing Assignment 6

Write an essay in which you describe or tell a story about a member of your family whom you know primarily through family stories. Try to chose a relative who is now dead, someone whom many other members of your family can remember. Research this topic in two ways: by interviewing members of your family about the person you have chosen and by investigating the time and culture of the world in which this person lived.

In your essay, try to re-create the time in which this person lived. Organize your essay around several stories about this person that have been passed on through your family. Use these stories to explain to the reader something about yourself and your family—not directly, but only implied. In other words, this essay should have contain a little history, a little biography, and should finally turn into a kind of autobiography.

Writing Assignment 6

Write an essay in which you describe yourself as a writer in relation to the other writers (and film makers) we have studied this semester. How have you changed as a writer? What kinds of writing are you most comfortable with? How can you explain these preferences and your developments as a writer? How does your writing compare with the writing of these other authors? (Stress what your writing has in common with these other writers.) Describe what you think you would be able to *do* as a writer (potential projects), rather than dwelling on your accomplishments.

Gordon P. Thomas
Department of English
University of Idaho
Moscow, ID 83844-1102

Internet: thomas@uidaho.edu
Phone: 208-885-6384